

## **Freedom Songs, well sort of**

**by Peter Stone Brown**

In June of 1963, my parents took me to a Pete Seeger concert in Lambertville, New Jersey. I'd seen Seeger twice before, but this concert was different because he sang a bunch of new songs, introducing me to the music of Bob Dylan, with "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" and "Who Killed Davey Moore," and in addition to a Tom Paxton song, sang a bunch of new songs from the Civil Rights demonstrations taking place in the streets of the South. A few hundred miles north in Boston that month, the music journalist Paul Williams would experience the same thing. Many of these songs, in fact pretty much the show I saw were released later that summer on Seeger's *We Shall Overcome* album recorded live at Carnegie Hall the same month.

The next month found me in a camp in Maryland. All summer long I heard "Blowin' In The Wind" by Peter, Paul & Mary every time I came near a transistor radio. Every week or so, a bus would take our group to either an amusement pier or a rolling skating rink. There were signs at both about the management refusing the right to refuse entrance to pretty much whomever it wanted. The second time at the roller rink, since I didn't roller skate, didn't want to roller skate, and thought staking around in a big circle to really awful organ music was totally idiotic, I just wandered around bored out of my mind. I noticed the sign again, stared at it for awhile and realized what it meant.

At the end of summer I went to a new home in a new town in North Jersey where the best thing about it was it was a short ride to New York City. My brother came home from a different camp. He already played guitar, but now was playing guitar and harmonica together and started telling me about this guy named Bob Dylan and sang some of his songs. It just so happened that Bob Dylan was going to be on TV possibly that night on a show on the educational station on a show called, "Songs of Freedom." Also appearing were Odetta and an a cappella group the Freedom Singers. Dylan sang "Only A Pawn in Their Game" and "Blowin' In The Wind," Odetta sang, "No More Auction Block, and "Oh Freedom," and the Freedom Singers sang, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round," "Woke Up This Morning With My Mind Set On Freedom" and "We Shall Overcome." The next day was the March on Washington, where Dylan would sing "Only A Pawn" as well as "When The Ship Comes In."

Less than three months later John F. Kennedy would be shot. Eight days later I saw Bob Dylan in concert for the first time. He opened

with "The Times They Are A-Changin'," and did several songs from the album that would be named after that song that would appear a couple of months later. There was a nightly folk music show at that time in the New York metropolitan area, the Jerry White show, and topical songs by a whole group of songwriters based in Greenwich Village and freedom songs were a part of it. If you went to a concert by just about any folksinger at the time, chances were good you'd hear some song related to the Civil Rights movement.

At the same time, slowly the lyrics would change in Soul music and R&B as well. Sam Cooke, inspired by "Blowin' In The Wind," started the ball rolling with "A Change Is Gonna Come," but it wasn't a big hit until after he was dead. Curtis Mayfield of the Impressions would write increasingly topical lyrics with songs such as "We're A Winner," "Keep On Pushing," "Choice of Colors," and "This Is My Country." In 1968, James Brown jumped in with "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud."

The day after my second Dylan concert at Philharmonic Hall in New York City on Halloween in 1964, I went to an afternoon concert at the Village Gate, where for one dollar I saw the first "Broadside Hoot." *Broadside* was a mimeographed magazine that published the songs of all the "topical" songwriters in New York as well as a few from other places in the country. Just about every singer-songwriter was there, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Eric Andersen, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Pat Sky, Len Chandler, Julius Lester, and Pete Seeger, Judy Collins and Ramblin' Jack Elliot as well. There's probably a couple of singers I forgot. The hoots continued into the spring of '65 and at every show a new freedom song or a song about what was happening in the Civil Rights Movement was introduced.

The songs that Pete Seeger sang at that June '63 concert, and the songs the Freedom Singers sang were songs that were sung at demonstrations, marches, sit-downs and rallies. Many of those songs came right out of the church based either on gospel songs or spirituals, and sometimes old folk songs. The same thing had been done with Union and Labor Movement songs in the '30s and '40s. The Freedom Singers who sang unaccompanied added a bit of doo-wop and rock 'n' roll into such songs as, "I Love Your Dog, I Love My Dog."

So when it was announced a few weeks ago that for Black History Month, there was going to be a program celebrating "The Music That Inspired the Civil Rights Movement" at the White House, and that among others Bob Dylan and the Freedom Singers were going to appear, a bunch of thoughts ran through my head. Among them what

a shame Odetta didn't leave to see it and take part, and whether all the original Freedom Singers were still alive.

It was both fun and sad watching the speculation as to what song or songs Dylan would sing on the various Dylan Internet forums. Sad because the majority of people posting their song picks didn't seem to realize what Dylan songs were even related to the Civil Rights Movement. I was pretty sure it would be either "Blowin' In The Wind," or "The Times They Are A-Changin' Myself," but I wasn't ruling out "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" either. All three he performs fairly regularly in concert. At the same time I thought it would have been amazing if he pulled "Oxford Town" or "Only A Pawn In Their Game." When it was announced a few days prior to the concert that Joan Baez was also going to perform, the speculation grew more intense for obvious reasons. It would be the first time that Dylan and Baez would be in the same place (publicly anyway) in 26 years. As it got closer to the concert which was going to be broadcast on a live Internet feed and rebroadcast on Public TV the next night, I wondered if it was going to even take place. Washington and many parts of the East Coast had been hit with a huge blizzard with an even worse forecast for the day of the show.

Mid-afternoon, the day before the originally scheduled concert, a friend tipped me off by e-mail that because of the blizzard, the concert had been moved up a day. More than likely what was supposed to be a dress rehearsal turned into the actual performance. Some performers such as Mavis Staples and Cordell Reagon of the Freedom Singers didn't make it to Washington at all.

The live feed took a long time to start. There were miscues, false starts, awkward moments, it was haphazard at best throughout.

After introductions by President Obama and emcee, Morgan Freeman, the music finally started with Yolanda Adams doing Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come." It was okay, but at times a bit extraneous. Frankly they should have had Aretha do it. Next came Smokey Robinson and Jennifer Hudson doing Curtis Mayfield's "People, Get Ready," really a gospel song. On the live feed, Smokey stopped the song in the middle and they restarted it. Again, it was okay, nothing special. Next came John Mellencamp, who after telling a long story brought some energy to the proceedings with "Keep Your Eyes On The Prize," based on the old spiritual "Hold On," which Dylan recorded as "Gospel Plow" on his first album, starting side two. This was also one of the songs Seeger sang that day.

This was followed by Natalie Cole doing Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." This song was actually depending on your point of view after what most people think of the Civil Rights Movement, released in 1971, political though it may be.

Next came Joan Baez appropriately enough singing "We Shall Overcome," in a shockingly and surprisingly weakened voice. Baez is one of the few performers who actually followed what she sang about with action, marching with Martin Luther King, risking her life in demonstrations and being jailed for action for both civil rights and peace. At the White House she took action again, gently, in the middle of the song talking about when King decided to add his voice to the anti-Vietnam war movement, which was a huge deal at the time. But make no mistake about it. It was Baez' way of respectfully telling Obama, get out of Afghanistan.

Next came Jennifer Hudson, followed by Yolanda Adams again doing "How Great That Art." I don't know what the hell this had to do with the movement, despite Morgan Freeman's loft introduction. I always associated it with an Elvis Presley album cover myself.

Next came the best part of the night, Bernice Reagon and the Freedom Singers. The Freedom Singers were an outgrowth of SNCC, (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee). In the '70s, she would form the amazing group, Sweet Honey In The Rock, remaining with them until 2004. At the White House the group included her daughter, singer-songwriter Toshi Reagon on guitar and singing as well on "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round." After the first verse, Reagon, stopped and said, "I know this is a show, but you actually have to sing this song. You never know when you might need it." To put it simply, the Freedom Singers rocked. They were the only performers to truly evoke the spirit of what happened at those demonstrations and marches, and they got the biggest hand from the audience in attendance, though it was a bit funny to see Washington's elite in their coats and ties singing along.

After a rather strange introduction by Freeman about the organizers singing and singers organizing, which was actually more appropriate for the Freedom Singers who were actually organizers, Bob Dylan took the stage accompanied by long-time bassist Tony Garnier, and pianist Patrick Warren, who contributed to Dylan's Christmas album. Playing an acoustic Martin guitar, right into the microphone for possibly the first time since 1974, Dylan launched into "The Times, They Are A-Changin'," in a piano-dominated waltz-like arrangement. Watching the Internet feed it appeared Dylan was having trouble with his guitar, but on reviewing the far better lit as well as larger TV,

version, he stops playing at the same part of the song each time, so it was part of the arrangement. More importantly, Dylan sang the song like he remembered why he wrote it (which doesn't necessarily happen at his concerts), but with full awareness of the intervening nearly 50 years, what happened and what didn't happen. As a result lines that once were full of anger and fire were now tinged with weariness. The line beseeching senators and congressmen not to stand in the doorway and block up the hall never seemed more timely.

Smokey Robinson then returned to sing Dion DiMucci's "Abraham, Martin and John." Now I happen to be a big Dion fan, but I always thought this song was really lame, even if Dylan did sing it in the early '80s. JFK only acted on Civil Rights when he was forced to and had little choice. Whether Robert Kennedy would have, we never got the chance to really find out. In actuality, Lyndon Johnson (who I despised when he was president) did way more than both.

A brief clip of Martin Luther King's famous "Free At Last Speech," at the March on Washington served to introduce the Five Blind Boys who rocked on "Free At Last," the song King was referring to. The concert ended with President Obama leading all the performers (with the exception of Dylan) in "Lift Every Voice And Sing," a song I had to learn at a cool private school I went to in sixth grade and in less politically correct times was once known as "the Negro national anthem."

Unfortunately, for me, few moments in the concert succeeded in capturing those times as they really were - too much of it was too far removed from the music that actually inspired the civil rights movement.